

The Debate about the Slave Family's Composition in the Americas under the Second Slavery



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Abstract

This text aims at a brief discussion about the dichotomy present in historical studies on slavery, specifically on the formation of slave families. The focus is to understand the limits and possibilities in the perspectives, and to suggest new ways for the studies of the slave family during the Second Slavery.

Keywords: Slavery in the Americas; XIX century; Slave family; Second slavery

Introduction

Theoretical perspectives, the use of historical documentation and studies of slavery in the Americas have increased in the last 30 years. The concept of Second Slavery, developed by the historian Dale Tomich [1], a professor at the University of Binghamton, has been crucial to understand the association between capitalism and slavery during the nineteenth century, especially in societies that have enlarged the number of slaves and their production of commodities, such as the Southern Region of the United States, Cuba, and Brazil. The second slavery is a concept that demarcates the revolution of Haiti, in 1791, as a founding fact of the restructuring of the slave logic in America. On the other hand, it is possible to point out critics towards this view of Global History for subjugating the agency of historical subjects within the context and structure of the world-economy established during the nineteenth century. To reflect on slavery in the Americas, it seems crucial not to forget to look beyond structure and to think of the choices made by men and women throughout history. This text aims to discuss briefly the possibilities and limitations within the field of historiography on the formation of slave families and the community tied between them.

From Violence to Agency

The formation of slave families within the slave quarters has been subject of debates in the historiography of slavery. It has been established by numerous historians that there has always been sociability among slaves within the slave quarters, as well as between different slave quarters - not to mention slavery in urban spaces, which allowed for greater mobility

and sociability among the slaves. Firstly, researches led by the Brazilian historians Manoel Florentino & José Roberto Goés [2], propose that, during the period of extensive transatlantic traffic to Brazil, slave owners sought to encourage the accomplishment of marriages among their slaves, having as a main objective that family relations and bonds of *compadrio* could generate "peace in the slave quarters". In other words, there would be a manorial strategy to pacify slave relations within their properties, enabling the reproduction of patriarchy and slavery [3].

Florentino and Goés also suggest that slave owners formed their slave quarters in order to consciously mix slaves of different ethnic origins to establish a never-ceasing state of war among the slaves, making the strategy of encouraging marriages and the formation of family's role in minimizing conflicts. This view of slave families can advance in the studies of patriarchy, i.e., in the power of seigniorial control over the lives of slaves, but it is a view of history that ultimately subjugates the slave's capacity for action within that society.

In the other spectrum of the debate, we find the researches by Robert W. Slenes, a professor in Brazil, originally from the United States. Discussing the family formations in São Paulo/Brazil in the nineteenth century, the author finds a key answer to the question of the formation of families in this region in the ethnic similarities of enslaved Africans and not in their differences. According to Slenes, they would be the great majority of the African slaves possessing near cultural elements and they had the same linguistic origins, which would have made possible greater sociability between them; outside the world of free, however,

it would form between them unique bonds of community. The author thus searches the African origins of slaves for possible relations within the slave community. In his words, he believes “that slaves in the Southeast would have constructed a variant of that double consciousness - the ability to move ladinly between cultural traditions and identity strategies many different (...)” [4]. In this perspective, we have the slave agency as the major focus, because Slenes considers that the resistance of the slaves and the proper sense of community created by them were main aspects in the formation of the slave families in Brazil.

Comparing these two theoretical perspectives, the one headed by the historian Robert W. Slenes approaches the one that considers the agency of the Africans enslaved in the decisions of their own lives, whereas the one of Manolo Florentino and José Goés considers the slaves lives as conditioned to both the patriarchalism and the decisions of their owners. This dichotomy between slave and patriarchal resistance, however, seems to have run out in historiography, and a new key of understanding is needed to perceive the formation of African American families during the slave system throughout the nineteenth century. It would not be, therefore, an act of will of the slaves nor a masterly oppression, but the asymmetrical relations of power established daily between opposite worlds.

Conclusion

A first step in attempting to advance the studies of slave families is to understand the historian Anthony Kaye’s critique towards the concept of slave community. Kaye criticizes the use of the term slave community, because he believes that the use of the term can generate a sense of closed group, i.e., a univocal group within the slave quarters. For the author, it is necessary for us to think of a more comprehensive term to understand the slave relations of power. He suggests throughout the book the term “slave neighborhood”, aiming to approach social relations in a comprehensive way, as well as trying to problematize the relations between slaves in the very neighborhood of the locality in which they live, taking into account the multiplicities of social relations existing in these slave societies.

To escape this false dichotomy between resistance and violence in historical studies of the formation of slave families, anthropological studies on African and African American communities may be fundamental. Nowadays we have available research on a variety of topics and methodologies about African societies and African American communities originated during the Second Slavery. Since slaves were brought to the Americas from the most varied African ethnic groups, it is necessary to understand their cultures fundamentally and how it was their

settling in American lands, without which it is impossible to understand the power relations established in America during slavery. It is also necessary to escape from this dichotomy to understand how Africans read the society in which they were made into a slave. As well as historians can and should seek anthropological studies on African communities, such as the research present in the “General History of Africa”, by Unesco [5] to build a solid basis for comparative studies of the formation of slave families during Second Slavery and also in post-abolition in the Americas [6-13].

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7. For further information regarding patriarchalism, see Genovese, Eugene (1972) *Roll: the world the slaves made*. (1st edn), First Vintage Books, Jordan.
8. Originally “que os escravos no Sudeste teriam construído uma variante daquela consciência dupla – a capacidade de circular ladinamente entre tradições culturais e estratégias identitárias diferentes (...)”. In: Slenes, Robert W. (1998). *Na Senzala uma Flor: as esperanças e as recordações na formação da família escrava – Brasil, sudeste, século XIX*. Nova Fronteira, Rio de Janeiro, Brasil, p. 53.
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